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# THE ULTIMATE EXERCISE GUIDE: JEFF NIPPARD'S BEST EXERCISE FOR EACH MUSCLE

**EXCLUSIVE BONUS CONTENT** 

Not all exercises are created equal.

Some are great for almost everyone. Some are good for a few lifters but mediocre for others. And some are just bad—a waste of time at best and an injury waiting to happen at worst.

Here, I'm focusing on the first category with a personal twist: The exercises in this ebook bonus to *The Muscle Ladder* are my all-time favorites for developing each muscle group.

But just because these are the best exercises in my opinion (more on that in a moment), that doesn't mean they're the *only* exercises you should do. As much as I love them, I don't include them in every program. Plus, variety is good for muscle growth, according to a review published in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

You just have to be smart about it. Rotating exercises in a systematic way can keep your workouts fresh and give your muscles new challenges, but too much variety can have the opposite effect. If you don't give your muscles time to make progress on a given exercise, you'll see slower gains.

Think of what follows as more of an intellectual exercise—a muscle-by-muscle guide to the movements that tick the most boxes for muscle growth—rather than a strict prescription.

## EXERCISE CRITERIA

Before we get into the exercises, let's talk about me. Specifically, I want to talk about why the best exercises for my body and my goals might not be the best for yours.

For example, the machine chest press is my favorite chest-building exercise. Maybe it's yours, too, but if you care about strength as well as size, it most likely isn't the best exercise for your goals. At best, it might rank third behind barbell and dumbbell bench presses.

Or maybe you don't have access to a good chest press machine. You can't know if the machine press is the best exercise for you because it's not an option.

Then there's your anatomy. If you've seen photos of me, you may have noticed I don't have particularly long arms or legs. I also don't have any serious injuries that affect my exercise choices. Your limb lengths, proportions, and injury history are probably different from mine, which means some of my choices might not be the most ideal fit for you. They might not work as well with your range of motion as they do with mine, or perhaps they aggravate a knee, back, or shoulder problem.

To be absolutely clear, the best exercises for me are not the best for every lifter in every context.

Also keep in mind that these are my favorite exercises for muscle growth. If I were training for strength or athletic performance or any other goal, my choices might be different.

Continuing with the terms and conditions, here are the general principles that guide my exercise selection:

- If your goal is to maximize muscular development, you need a combination of compound and isolation exercises. It's not eitheror. It's both-and.
- There's no precise ratio of compound to isolation movements that applies to every bodybuilding program. In my workouts, I usually use about 50 to 70 percent compound exercises and 30 to 50 percent isolation exercises. Your ratio depends on your goals, preferences, and experience.
- Compound exercises usually work best early in a workout. Of course, there can be exceptions, but most of the time, you want to do the most technically complex and physically demanding exercises when you're fresh and focused.
- Use isolation exercises to fill any gaps in your workout. If it's leg day, for example, you might start your workout with barbell back squats, which work just about every lower-body muscle to some degree but primarily hit the guads and glutes. Isolation exercises like hamstring curls and calf raises work the muscles you can't fully activate with the primary movement.

Here's what I looked for when choosing the best exercise for each muscle:

- There's high tension in the stretched position. Mounting evidence suggests that this portion of the lift—the bottom position of a biceps curl, for example—stimulates more muscle growth than the "squeeze" portion when your muscles are fully contracted.2
- It allows for progressive overload. It should be simple to add weight or reps from week to week.
- It feels good. If you feel pain or discomfort anywhere in the range of motion, it's not your best choice (at least not for now).

# UPPER BODY

#### **CHEST**

#### MY CHOICE:

Machine chest press



A good machine chest press gives you a deep stretch in your pecs at the start of the lift and provides high muscle tension throughout the entire range of motion. It's also easy to overload, allowing you to add weight or reps from week to week.

Because you're lifting along a fixed trajectory, a machine makes it easy to establish a very strong mind-muscle connection with your pecs, which in turn leads to a satisfying pump. These things may

not be major factors for driving muscle growth, but they do make training a lot more enjoyable. You also can safely go to failure without the need for a spotter, which is something you can't do with a barbell press. This likely does matter for maximizing growth.<sup>3</sup>

If your gym has equipment that ticks all those boxes, there's virtually no downside to using the machine chest press as your primary chest exercise.

#### **BACKUP OPTION:**

Dumbbell incline press



If you don't have access to a good machine, the incline dumbbell press is my favorite choice for a couple of reasons:

• First, dumbbells allow a deeper stretch in your pecs than you can get with a barbell.

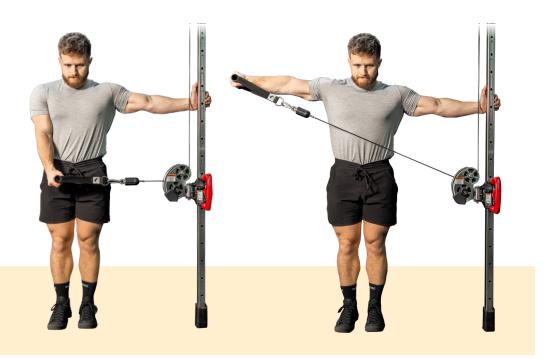
• Second, because you're less likely to let your ego take over with the bench at an incline, they're less likely to aggravate shoulder or elbow issues.

Both the incline and flat dumbbell press are great options, but the incline places a bit more tension on the upper pecs without taking anything away from the mid and lower pecs, which is what gives it the slight edge.<sup>4</sup>

#### **SHOULDERS**

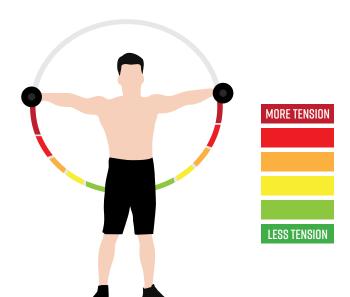
#### MY CHOICE:

Cable lateral raise



The dumbbell lateral raise has been the go-to shoulder exercise for generations of bodybuilders. I'm not sure bodybuilding magazines would have existed if not for the anatomy lessons readers got from close-up photos of massive deltoids straining to lift dumbbells out to the side.

But the most popular exercise has a significant drawback: Your deltoids aren't under tension throughout the lift. There's zero tension on the delts at the bottom, and you don't reach maximum tension until you approach the top of the lift, when your arms are parallel to the floor.



You won't have this problem with the cable lateral raise. As long as you set the cable pulley at about hand-height (level with your upper to middle thighs), you'll feel the most tension in your side delt at the beginning of the movement, when your arm is perpendicular to the cable and the muscle is fully stretched.

Even more important, to me, is that the cable lateral raise simply feels good—continuous tension in the muscle without strain in the shoulder joint. It's also surprisingly versatile. You can shift some emphasis to the front delt by lifting up and slightly forward. To shift emphasis to your rear delts, you can lean your torso slightly forward and raise the cable out to the side.

One slight drawback to the exercise is that your forearms are also under a lot of tension. Although my grip won't be a limiting factor, sometimes I get such a big pump in my forearms that it's hard to focus on my delts. I get around this by doing the cable lateral raise with a wrist cuff instead of the standard D-shaped handle. I also usually hold a lacrosse ball because it feels awkward to lift without anything in my hand.

#### **BACKUP OPTION:**

Lean-in dumbbell lateral raise



By leaning against a wall, squat rack, or an incline bench (as shown in the photo), you can start the lateral raise with tension on your side delts and maintain that tension throughout the movement. This is my go-to shoulder exercise when I don't have access to a cable machine.

#### **LATS**

#### MY CHOICE:

Neutral-grip close-grip lat pulldown



Pulldowns offer smooth, even tension throughout the range of motion, with a big lat stretch at the top. Also, in contrast to the traditional pulldown with a wide, overhand grip, the neutral grip puts more emphasis on your lats and less on your middle traps. Although it can be tempting to use momentum and lean back at the bottom of each rep, try focusing on driving your elbows down, which engages your lats more, rather than driving your elbows back, which engages more of your middle traps.

#### **BACKUP OPTION:**

Neutral-grip pull-up



Like the lat pulldown with a close, neutral grip, this pull-up variation offers high tension in the stretched position. However, the resistance curve is trickier because pull-ups feel much easier at the bottom compared to the top of the range of motion.

If you struggle to get more than about 6 reps of bodyweight pull-ups, you can try using a band or assisted pull-up machine for assistance. If bodyweight pull-ups are too easy, you can always add some weight with a weight belt.

#### MID-BACK

#### MY CHOICE:

Chest-supported T-bar



The chest-supported row gives you much more stability than free-standing barbell rows. That stability, in turn, allows you to better control the lift and direct all of the tension to your middle back.

Chest-supported rows also give a great stretch on the lats and mid-traps at the bottom of the range of motion. I consider these to be an absolute staple of any bodybuilding routine.

## **BACKUP OPTION:**Deficit Pendlay row



If a deadlift married a barbell row, the result would be the Pendlay row. The movement starts like a deadlift, with the bar on the floor, but instead of using your hips to pull it up your shins, you bend over with your torso parallel to the floor and row the bar up to your abdomen.

Having your back parallel to the floor places your back muscles under a higher degree of stretch and tension compared to a standard barbell row. It also allows for more consistent progression because your form is tighter, with the bar returning back to the floor between each rep.

A deficit Pendlay row is the same movement, except you're standing on a bumper plate to add a few inches to your range of motion. This places an even greater stretch on your back at the bottom of each rep.

#### **BICEPS**

#### MY CHOICE:

Bayesian cable curl



As you've figured out by now, I like to start reps from a fully stretched position. The Bayesian curl takes that to another level.

I like to set the cable up at wrist height and then take two steps out. That means my arm is slightly

behind my torso, which puts a massive stretch on the biceps at the bottom of the movement.

If you have any size or strength imbalances between your biceps, start with your weaker arm and then match the reps with your stronger arm.

## BACKUP OPTION:

45-degree dumbbell preacher curl



Using a dumbbell places maximum tension on the biceps at the bottom of the range of motion while they're most stretched. The preacher pad also locks your elbows in place, which prevents cheating or form breakdown as you approach failure. I love using these as a 15- to 20-rep "finisher" exercise.

#### **TRICEPS**

#### MY CHOICE:

Overhead cable triceps extension

The advantage the overhead extension has over other triceps exercises is just that: It's overhead.

That position puts the biggest possible stretch on the long head of the triceps, which is the only head of the triceps that acts on both the elbow and shoulder joints. A 2023 study found that overhead extensions caused about 40 percent more triceps growth than pressdowns.5

I still include pressdowns, but if I had to pick just one, it'd be an overhead extension.



#### **BACKUP OPTION:** Skull crusher





The secret to a perfect skull crusher is to avoid actually crushing your skull. Start with your upper arms angled slightly toward your ears, rather than perpendicular to your torso with your elbows pointed straight up. That puts the long head in a more stretched position.

Lower the EZ-curl bar or dumbbells back behind your head, keeping your upper arms locked in place throughout the range of motion.

#### **FOREARMS**

#### MY CHOICE:

Dumbbell wrist curl/ reverse curl



Yes, I went with basic forearm flexion and extension curl your wrist up, bend it back. There's no easier or more universally accessible way to isolate the forearm muscles. For stability, rest your forearm on a bench with your hand and wrist hanging off the edge.

### **BACKUP OPTION:**

Wrist roller

Here's an old-school DIY exercise apparatus: Attach one end of a rope to a section of broom handle and the other end to a dumbbell or weight plate. Then roll the weight up as high as you can and actively unwind the rope on the way down, rather than just letting it fall back to the floor.

The rolling action means one hand flexes as the other extends, which works all the muscles in both forearms with a single exercise.

Be sure to hold the roller close to your chest to avoid fatiguing the front delts.



#### **NECK**

#### MY CHOICE:

Neck curl/extension





You really can't beat a standard neck curl or neck extension for building a thicker neck. Neck curls target the largest muscle of the front of the neck, the sternocleidomastoid, whereas neck extensions work the upper traps and other neck extensors, which make up the muscle mass on the back of your neck.

If you're doing these with a weight plate, you'll need some way to protect your head. You can wrap a towel around the plate or wear a beanie on your head.

You'll also want to do a thorough warmup before working your neck muscles to fatigue.



I love using the trap or hex bar for shrugs because it allows you to lift with your arms slightly out to the sides, rather than shrugging straight up and down. Anatomical data show this grip aligns more closely with the angle of the muscle fibers of the upper traps.6

Focus on shrugging your shoulders up and in, as if you're trying to touch your ears with your shoulders.



If you don't have a trap bar, you can get the same effect by doing a barbell shrug with a wide grip.

#### **ABS**

#### MY CHOICE:

Cable crunch



The purpose of an "ab" exercise, in contrast to a "core" exercise, is to increase the size of the abdominal muscles, primarily the rectus abdominis. Nothing thickens up your six-pack more than cable crunches.

The reasons are simple: They're among the easiest to overload, they allow a good stretch at the top,

and you can also get a great squeeze at the bottom as long as you round your back at the end.

Do the movement slowly and deliberately, maintaining continual tension on the ab muscles. Avoid yanking the weight down with your arms. You want your abs to do all the work.

#### **BACKUP OPTION:**

Weight-plate crunch



Loaded crunches with a weight plate are a decent substitute. Hold the plate against your chest and be sure to crunch down hard, using your ab muscles to pull your rib cage down toward your pelvis.

# LOWER BODY

#### LOWER BACK

MY CHOICE:



The good morning is among the most underrated exercises, in my opinion. It's easy to progressively overload, and it targets the biggest muscles of the posterior chain.

If you've never done it before, start with an unloaded bar and progress slowly. It's a unique movement pattern, and you want to give your body plenty of time to get used to it.

Even as you get comfortable with the exercise, you can generally expect that you won't use loads beyond 40 to 50 percent of your one-rep max on the barbell squat.





The Romanian deadlift (RDL) is most similar to the good morning in muscle activation. The conventional (as shown in the photos) and sumo deadlift are also great options for the posterior chain, although both variations involve the quads significantly more than deadlifts done with a straight leg.



#### **QUADS**

MY CHOICE:

Hack squat



The hack squat ticks a lot of the same boxes as the barbell squat, which is my backup pick. But the hack squat offers a few extra benefits: There's less setup, which means you can typically work more efficiently. And because the machine provides stability, you can experiment with different foot positions to find the one that is most comfortable and allows the most continuous quad tension.

If you're worried that you'll build less muscle with a machine than with free weights, don't. The latest research shows you can build just as much muscle with machines as long as you push yourself hard on each set.7

## **BACKUP OPTION:**

Barbell back or front squat



Right now, you're probably wondering what I have against the barbell squat, the most popular lowerbody exercise of all time. Short answer: nothing. It's popular for multiple reasons.

First, there's the amount of tension you can achieve in your guads at the bottom of the range of motion. Second, it's one of the very best exercises for progressive overload. Most lifters can continue adding weight for years before finally reaching their limit. That means you can continue building size along with strength for as long as you want to continue pushing yourself. If you need any proof that squats build monster quads, check out a powerlifting meet.

So what's the catch? Why isn't it my top exercise for the quads?

Start with the technical complexity. The barbell squat involves much more technical learning than a hack squat does. It's also less stable, which means it may be slightly less realistic to get your quads close to true failure.

It's also worth mentioning that one head of the quads is not especially activated in the squat: the rectus femoris, a long, flat muscle that runs down the middle of the quads. As you squat, the part of the rectus femoris that acts on the knee shortens while the other part lengthens. That means it doesn't actually change length or experience much tension during the squat. Of course, this limitation applies to hack squats, too.

While all that is interesting to people who nerd out on anatomy and kinesiology, recent studies still show pretty decent rectus femoris growth with squats.8 And if you simply add leg extensions to your lower-body program, you don't have to worry about that one head of the quads lagging behind the others.

The barbell front squat has all the same benefits and challenges as the back squat (as shown in the photo), but with a twist: It may shift even more tension to the quads. The position of the barbell on the front of your shoulders forces you to keep a more upright posture. You'll drop the bar if you bend too far forward. It's another really solid go-to for quad growth.

#### **GLUTES**

MY CHOICE: Lunge



For bodybuilding purposes, the lunge is usually considered a quad exercise, but I think this is a bit overstated. In my experience, lunges produce much, much more stretch and tension in your glutes than

you'll get in your quads. That's especially apparent when you take medium to long steps forward. This makes them an excellent glute builder, while also being a decent choice for quad growth.



You probably expected the hip thrust to be my top glute exercise, considering its popularity in the "glute world." It's also shockingly easy to overload, as evidenced by all the videos of physique athletes lifting several times their body weight.

It is, indeed, a good exercise, but I hesitate to call it the best one because of the resistance curve. The

most challenging part of the movement is at the top, when you're squeezing the glutes. By contrast, the most challenging part of the lunge is at the bottom, when your glutes are stretched.

You won't hurt my feelings if you choose hip thrusts over lunges. Bottom line: They're both really solid options.

#### **HAMSTRINGS**

MY CHOICE:

Seated leg curl



If you have multiple machines to choose from, I recommend you choose the seated leg curl over the lying leg curl. The reason, as you can probably guess by now, is that your hamstrings start from a more stretched position when you're sitting upright than when you're lying prone. In fact, a 2021 study found that seated curls produced 55 percent more hamstring growth compared to lying curls.9

You can create an even deeper stretch by leaning forward over the lap bar.

All that said, there's nothing wrong with using the lying leg curl if it's your only option, you prefer it, or you want to mix things up from time to time.

#### **BACKUP OPTION:** Nordic ham curl



Nordic ham curls are hard to do without assistance, and you may need some coaching as well. Even then, it takes a lot of practice to get the hang of them, and they're tricky to progressively overload. But they do isolate the hamstrings, and the trouble it takes to master them can be well worth it, especially if you don't have access to decent leg curl machines.

If you decide to take the Nordic challenge, I recommend focusing on increasing your range of motion from week to week. That is, work on lowering yourself closer to the floor before reversing the motion to return to an upright position. Or you can work on using less assistance over time. For example, if you use a resistance band wrapped around your chest to help you expand your range of motion, you can use a lighter band over time.

What if neither option works for you—you don't have the equipment for a seated leg curl or the inclination to learn the Nordic ham curl? There's always the Romanian deadlift (RDL), which hits three-fourths of your hamstrings, glutes, and lower back. The only part it misses is the short head of the biceps femoris. Unlike the other parts of the muscle, which act on both the knee and hip joints, the short head's only job is to help bend your knee.

So RDLs hit three of the four heads, while all varieties of leg curls hit all four heads.

#### **CALVES**

#### MY CHOICE:

Standing calf raise



A 2023 study found that standing calf raises produced 2.6 times as much muscle growth as seated calf raises.<sup>10</sup> What's the difference, you ask? Say it with me: The standing calf raise puts the calf muscles in a more stretched position at the beginning of the movement.

Another recent study found that lengthened partials—performing just the first half of the

BACKUP OPTION: Leg press toe press exercise—resulted in significantly greater muscle growth than using the full range of motion.<sup>11</sup>

So if you're struggling to grow your calves, try lengthened partials instead of traditional toe raises for a month or two and see what happens.



Because your knee is still straight, this is effectively the same movement as the standing calf raise, but you get to sit down, which can be nice if you're leaving your calf work until the end of a long leg day. All the same technique considerations apply here. Focus on the stretch, pause at the bottom, and don't worry about finishing your reps by going all the way up on your toes.

## CONCLUSION

There you have it! My favorite exercise for each muscle, plus a backup option or two.

Now you're ready to get the absolute most out of your workouts when your copy of *The Muscle Ladder* arrives. Thanks so much for supporting my work by preordering. I really appreciate it!

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